

Challenges in the Growth of Organics

Clark F. Driftmier

Aurora Organic Dairy

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Mr. Chairman, distinguished NOSB and USDA colleagues, and fellow members of the organic community:

Thank you for the opportunity to speak today. I bring you greetings from the 170 employees of Aurora Organic Dairy and from the more than 200 partners and family farmers who work with our company. Our employees and their families come from diverse regions and from many different walks of life. So too, the attendees at this meeting today come from diverse backgrounds, and we bring to this meeting different experiences, opinions and visions for the future of organics. I would like to share some of our thoughts on the future of the organic movement, along with recommendations to this august body on the actions you can take to ensure a successful future for everyone in organic.

In our opinion, the organic movement has two principle goals: first; to convert a significant percentage of U.S. agriculture to certified organic production methods, and second; to stimulate an equally significant demand for organic products among U.S. consumers. Let me propose a definition of “significant” that sets the goal of organic at no less than 20% of U.S. agriculture and 20% of the food & other purchases of U.S. consumers.

To put this goal in perspective, there are currently 3 ½ to 4 million acres of organic agriculture in America. The achievements in organic to date are a testament to the dedication of everyone in this room and also in the greater organic community.

However, there are 936 million total acres of agriculture in America. Within this larger context, organic acreage comprises only 4/10 of 1 percent. Organic sales at retail are about \$12 billion dollars, about 2% of total food industry sales of \$535 billion. There are about 75,000 certified organic milk cows, 8/10 of 1% of the total US dairy herd of 9 million head.

To reach the 20% goal, more than 180 million acres of agriculture need to be converted to organic production. Nearly two million dairy cows need to be converted, and retail organic sales need to increase to more than \$100 billion dollars. Some in this room might disagree with so high a figure, yet I believe this goal is eminently achievable - - indeed, it is absolutely necessary - - in order for organic to achieve its fullest promise. Organic can, and should, be a truly significant part of U.S. agriculture. Most of us have come to organic because we rallied to the mission-oriented call to convert agriculture, to change paradigms, to “storm the ramparts” if you will. I believe that this “mission” orientation of organic is very good and must be promoted.

But I also believe that a strong sense of mission must be accompanied by the practical “nuts & bolts” activities that will facilitate its achievement. Agriculture and food processing, both organic and conventional, are very tangible activities. There is nothing abstract or theoretical about them. They use tractors and trucks, boxes, warehouses and packaging lines. They create products that must appeal to U.S. consumers in taste, texture and appearance. As organic moves from the fringe of society to its center, these products must appeal, increasingly, to mainstream American tastes and expectations. They must be placed on shelves in those places

where U.S. consumers actually buy their products, in packages and forms that consumers know and trust, using processing techniques that uphold the highest standards of quality and food safety. These products must also be offered at more affordable prices that mainstream Americans are willing to pay.

And yet, I see a dichotomy in this regard among certain of our organic colleagues. Certain people say they have a strong mission orientation to build organic, but they operate within an abstract, theoretical construct that is totally disconnected from, or even counter-productive to, the practical, nuts-n-bolts activities required to build the organic opportunity. These people say they want to change the world to organic, but they argue for illogical restrictions that would prevent organic from fulfilling its promise. They want everyone to eat organic, but they won't allow for practical and necessary items - - for example, they seek to disallow leavening agents to make organic baked goods and pectin to make organic jam. I ask you - - How can we storm the ramparts, convert agriculture, and convince millions of consumers to buy organic - - if our dough won't rise and our jam won't set?

Some of these people say they want everyone in America to drink organic milk, but they seek to impose geographic exclusivity to limit the production of organic milk to a few verdant acres in the wettest climates and to prevent its expansion to the more arid regions of the country. They also seek to limit organic only to smaller farms, and to prevent larger farms from participating in the organic opportunity. Additionally, they howl in protest at any innovations or new models to improve the production of organic milk.

All of this, to me, is counter-productive, especially in relation to the huge challenge facing us. If the goal is to convert anywhere close to 180 million acres, and up to two million dairy cows, then all of us are needed - - and then some - - working together and growing as rapidly and diversely as possible. East and west, big and small, all geographies, all ranges of scale, all types of operations, with new innovations and new models, under a set of rules that facilitates significant growth.

The dis-harmony we have seen lately, the distractions, the lawsuits, have not advanced us one inch toward the larger promise of organic. In fact, they have taken us backwards. Several knowledgeable assessments of the impact of the current lawsuits conclude that organic growth will be significantly stunted by these ill-advised actions. I think we face the very real prospect of organic retreating backwards towards the fringe of American society if we continue to make self-defeating actions that hurt rather than help our cause.

I know that the rapid growth of organic is disconcerting to some. There are those who warn that organic is getting too big, too corporate, too mainstream. I argue something different - - that organic is actually much, much too small. The portion of agriculture that organic comprises - - 4/10 of 1 percent - - isn't good enough. It isn't big enough. It doesn't have the size or the scale or the clout to achieve the goal we all hold, which is to make organic a real force for change in America. We can, and we should, strive for much more, including a much more robust plan to convert agricultural acreage to organic in bigger and faster chunks. Certainly, every conversion is good - - be it ½ acre or 100,000 acres. But there are some who argue that only the small conversions, only the small farms, are true to the spirit of organic.

We respectfully disagree. Both small and large conversions are necessary, and both small farms and large farms have vital roles to perform. It's not enough to have symbolic victories, we also need tangible victories. And in the broad challenges before us, we will achieve tangible victories when we successfully convert tens of millions of acres and many hundreds of thousands of dairy cows. All of us should share in this goal, and both smaller and larger companies should take significant steps in that direction, with mutual encouragement and mutual support.

We also need a pragmatic, practical set of rules and guidelines designed to facilitate the rapid growth of organic across all segments, geographies, sizes and scales. This is where you come in. The NOSB and NOP fulfill critical and irreplaceable roles in the growth of the organic movement, and your actions have a major impact on the course of organics. We call upon you to fulfill your charter in a way that promotes the rapid growth and expansion of organic, and to reject any counter-productive actions that would limit or stagnate its growth. In this vein, we recommend that you soundly reject those forces who would use lawsuits and other defeatist strategies to derail the progress we have made thus far. And finally, we ask that you give equal support, equal encouragement, to all segments of organic, east and west, big and small, family farms and corporations and LLC's and what-have-you. Because in the final analysis, all of us are in the same boat, and we are all pulling on the oars toward the same destination - - the conversion of U.S. agriculture to certified organic methods and the widespread adoption of organic products by the American people.

Thank you very much, and here's to our organic future!